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The Waste Land

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Resumen: El propósito de esta tesis es explorar y analizar el uso del recurso del Método Mítico por parte de T.S. Eliot en su obra culmen *The Waste Land* (1922). Para ello, se realizará un análisis previo del concepto, y a continuación, se examinarán diferentes elementos del método mítico en la obra, los cuales tienen el fin de proporcionar conexiones entre la simbología de los mitos de vegetación y los rituales de fertilidad con la contemporaneidad y el “yo moderno”. Esta tesis tiene como objetivo entender las correlaciones que crea Eliot entre la espiritualidad de los mitos antiguos en contraste con el estado de decadencia del mundo contemporáneo y de la civilización occidental. Así como evidenciar la búsqueda de regeneración y cambio por parte del poeta tanto en “The Waste Land” como en el tiempo presente

Palabras Clave: Método Mítico, T.S. Eliot, *La Tierra Baldía*, poesía del S.XX, Modernismo, mito.

Abstract: The aim of this thesis is to explore and analyse the use of the mythical method by T.S. Eliot in his masterpiece *The Waste Land* (1922). In order to do this, I will carry out a preliminary analysis of this method. Subsequently, I will examine different elements of the mythical method in the poem so as to provide connections between the symbolism of vegetation myths and fertility rituals with contemporaneity and the modern self. The objective of this thesis is to understand Eliot’s correlations between the spirituality of the ancient myths, in contrast with the state of decadence of the contemporary world and the Western civilization. As well as to evidence the poet’s quest to search for regeneration and change, in the “The Waste Land” and in the present time.

Key words: Mythical Method, T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, Twentieth Century-Poetry, Modernism, myth.

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1. Introduction and Literary Context

Modernism was an artistic vanguard that arose in the first two decades of the twentieth century. It was characterized by a desire for literary innovation and the rejection of the Romantic and Victorian aesthetic of the previous century. 1922 was the greatest year of this movement due to the publication of two milestones: *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot, and *Ulysses* by James Joyce. Both masterpieces introduced new formal techniques such as stream of consciousness, blank verse, and the mythical method, which is the central object of discussion in this paper.

The Waste Land quickly turned into an indicator of the new tendency and became the archetypal Modernist poem, mixing registers, languages, and presenting the sceptical vision of the post-war modern man. *The Waste Land* has been read and analysed from a wide range of perspectives: Generally, as a poem of failure, but also, as Longenbach pointed out, a fragmented poem that exudes a sensation of a “painful nostalgia for a wholeness that is not possible anymore” (201). *The Waste Land* is a collection of myths, stories, and excerpts that eventually “remain suspended and inconclusive. Their arguments have no beginning, no middle, and no end.” (Pâtea 105). Nevertheless, in a similar way that Joyce turns to the myths of the *Odyssey* as a guideline in his story, in *The Waste Land*, Eliot resorts to “a web of classical and anthropological sources” (Pâtea 96), which not only provide meaning and structure, but also give order to the labyrinth of stories and perceptions which is the poem.

By virtue of the use of the mythical method, T.S. Eliot develops an imaginary world in which he establishes correspondences between ancient myths, rituals, religions of different cultures, contemporary history, and modern life. By applying this method, the poet tries to depict the contemporary fragmentation of mankind, the fall of civilization, and the nostalgia for a unity no longer possible (Pâtea 105).

Eliot maintains that there exist continuous theories and patterns throughout history in the collective consciousness of humankind. He makes claims for the essential link between art, archaic spirituality, and the structures of the unconscious. Eliot argues that modern art was made possible by the rediscovery of myths, religious symbols and archaic modes of consciousness that survive in the unconscious structures of the psyche (Pâtea 94). Eliot's considerations were based on the psychological interpretation that Jung gave to the vegetative myths and fertility rituals of a dying and reviving god. These mythical narratives were correlated with the archetype of individuation and integration of personality, and the psychological stages of the evolution of the self. In their life, people experience different instants of death and rebirth. The individual is reborn with a new conscience, a new personality. Jung's premises will be transformed by Eliot in *The Waste Land*, into art, into a new poetic language. Through the mythical method, he revivifies those death and rebirth myths and their symbolic processes of regeneration in the present-day.

For the writing process of *The Waste Land*, Eliot was especially influenced by two books: Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. According to Eliot's own words, the first one provided "not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism" (286). Eliot particularly studied Weston's theories about the ritual origins of the grail legends and its influence on the tales. The second source was Frazer's anthropological study, which is a compendium of myths and fertility ceremonies, about archaic religions and a sacrificial vegetative deity that dies and comes back to life. Eliot recognized Frazer's "indelible impact on the literary and psychological circles of his generation" (Pâtea 96) in his own work.

In essence, as Viorica Pâtea says, in *The Waste Land* Eliot questions modernity by looking back to the archaic myths of Frazer and Weston and the spirituality of the ancient religions in contrast with the extremely rational and disillusioned contemporary Western culture (109).

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse Eliot's mythical method in *The Waste Land*, which explores the archetypal meanings of ancient vegetation myths and fertility rituals. To do so, specific passages with relevant elements of the mythical method in the poem will be examined in order to search for connections between the mythic consciousness and the modern self that led Eliot to the creation of a critical but unified contemporaneous spiritual and poetic language.

2. The Mythical Method

One year after *The Waste Land* was completed, Eliot coined the term "mythical method" in his article "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" (1923). In this review of Joyce's oeuvre, he theorized on this new way of writing and outlined its importance as a new literary technique. Eliot even declared that other writers should follow in Joyce's footsteps "Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him." (177). He explained that the mythical method consisted of creating "a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity". "It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the intense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (177). The poet uses the myths as a common ground that provides meaning and order to the chaotic present era. In explaining the connections between myth and contemporaneity, the poet proposes a vantage point from where to assess the contemporary world and make it appear to have this mentioned order and meaning.

3. Elements of the Mythical Method in *The Waste Land*

3.1 Vegetation Myths and Fertility Rituals

As discussed above, Eliot was heavily influenced by Weston and Frazer when he wrote *The Waste Land*. Their interpretation of the vegetation myths and fertility rituals provided Eliot with the means to shape the poetic pattern of the poem and its symbolic frame (Práce 8). The ideas that surround these connections are Frazer's examinations of vegetation ceremonies in primitive societies. These rituals are linked to the celebration of the natural cycle of vegetation which dies in autumn yet grows again in spring. The death and rebirth of nature is seen as the personification of a vegetation god that appears almost universally in ancient civilizations (Práce 9). Deities such as Adonis, Attis or Osiris that faced death but eventually came back to life, constitute embodiments of the powers of nature (Frazer 268). Primitive religions conceived the organic cycle of seasons as a passage from death to life of these gods who controlled nature, and the vegetations rituals were celebrated in their honour. Furthermore, these gods share that they are saved by a loving goddess: Adonis by Aphrodite, Attis by Cybele or, Osiris by Isis, which reinforces the interrelationship of love and sexuality with rebirth and the vegetation rituals.

In a more practical approach, right at the beginning, we encounter the most iconic lines of the poem which are an invocation to the month of April, and a reference to *The Canterbury Tales*. In Chaucer's oeuvre, April, the beginning of spring, is a celebrated time that brings new life and love. However, in *The Waste Land*, "April is the cruelest month" (TWL 1).¹ The month of the ancient fertility and vegetation rites, the passion of Christ, and the time of the renewal of life, is suddenly presented as "cruel". April is

¹ Unless otherwise stated, "TWL" abbreviation will be used for referencing lines of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* from Pâtea, Viorica ed. T.S. Eliot, *La Tierra Baldía*. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra. 2018. Print.

negatively interpreted because it breeds life from death. It brings an endless sensation of circularity that mixes “memory and desire” (TWL 3), past and future. This is cruel because when remembering the past and desiring the future, the wastelanders are “left with a vacuum in the present moment, an absence in the middle of their life” (Brooker and Bentley 62).

In a similar way that April is perceived as cruel by the wastelanders, “Winter kept us warm” (TWS 5) is a yearning for a season, usually perceived as the hardest of the year and which has strong death connotations, but which in the poem is seen as pleasant and secure. Within this perspective, the limits between death and life are uncertain. The wastelanders, who are emblems of the modern self, are torn between the safe lethargy of winter and the challenging but promising invitation to the new vitality of spring (Pâtea 97).

Nevertheless, according to Brooker and Bentley, in the end, “the wastelanders cannot experience the mythical mode of perception” (62). They are not like the mythic gods and heroes who transcend death, and who are celebrated in the spring vegetation rituals. Eliot suggests that the wastelanders are ignorant of the truth of the ancient myths and religions, of that ancient mythic mode of knowing. Therefore, the inhabitants of *The Waste Land* will not transcend in contemporary time and “will always experience April as cruel” (Brooker and Bentley 62-63).

Fertility rituals were initiation ceremonies that consisted in the passage from childhood to maturity. In these rites, the young initiate had to spend some time in the wild and confront the unknown, not only the actual dangers but also its own fears. Viorica Pâtea states that, Eliot saw in these myths and archaic rites “the symbolic expressions of psychological patterns that point the way towards spiritual development and release from confining patterns of existence” (98). The regenerative transition of the individual is the

central idea in *The Waste Land* which centres on death and rebirth. By the use of the mythical method, In Pâtea's view, Eliot presents the Jungian process of "breakdown and integration of the individual psyche projected onto the background of a larger quest for cultural values of a ruined civilization struggling to retrieve its spiritual sources" (Pâtea 98).

Ancient religions were based on primitive vegetation myths and fertility rituals, that were later personified in the figure of the god-king. This was an incarnation of the Frazerian god that lives, dies, and is reborn for his people whom he nourishes with his own body. This is for instance represented through the figure of Osiris in ancient Egypt, god of trees and cereal, or Christ who fed his people with his own body and his blood as recorded in the sacrament of the eucharist. From this idea derives the archaic belief that "their safety and prosperity is bound up with the life of these god-men or human incarnations of divinity" (Frazer 300).

3.2 The Legend of the Grail and the Fisher King.

The figure of a god-king celebrated in the vegetation myths and fertility rituals is a recurrent symbol present in *The Waste Land*. Eliot recalls references to the legend of the grail. The archetypal imagery of the myth is melted together in the poem under the figure of the Fisher King, who is associated by Eliot with the card of Madame Sosostris "The Man with Three Staves" (TWL 51). In the legend, the Fisher King is wounded by a spear which is perceived as a representation of the draining of blood, water and prosperity. For this reason, he becomes sterile and due to his disease, the whole kingdom suffers the consequences and becomes a wasteland.

In *From Ritual to Romance*, Weston develops the idea that the medieval grail legends were originated as pagan fertility rituals, celebrated to grant fertility to the crops, and enough supply of water (Ullyot 48). However, in *The Waste Land*, the descriptions of drought and sexual sterility suggest that this is a present world in which the sacrificial meaning of these rituals is lost (Ullyot 48). In line with this idea, Edmund Wilson holds that “the poet of *The Waste Land* is living half the time in the real world of contemporary London and half the time in the haunted wilderness of the medieval legend” (90-91).

By revivifying the myth, Eliot presents an intellectual and poetic quest to discover the origin of vegetative life, explore those ancient fertility rituals, and finally, be part of the archaic collective conscious. Notwithstanding, in contrast with the grail legend, Eliot’s focus of attention lies on the image of the wounded Fisher King rather than on the hero’s quest. This is because, instead of looking for a hero like Percival trying to liberate the myth and revivify *The Waste Land*, Eliot delves into the corrupt imaginary of the land, the Fisher King, the drowned man, and the Hanged Man (Ullyot 51).

3.3 Madame Sosostris and the Tarot Deck

Madame Sosostris, the “famous clairvoyante” (TWL 43), is presented in *The Waste Land* as a sort of contemporaneous prophet. However, she is just a modernized vulgar version of the Egyptian diviners, who used the tarot cards to predict the rise and fall of the river Nile which brought fertility or death to the land. Weston formulates connections between the imaginary of the tarot cards and of the grail (Ullyot 48). The main symbols of the tarot pack have a sexual symbology that resembles the grail and the spear, which are motifs of the ancient rites of fertility. The tarot cards symbolise the stages of the initiation journey

that the young and ignorant man “the Fool” has to overcome to become a new individual, a more experienced consciousness (Pâtea 205).

3.4 Phlebas the Drowned Phoenician Sailor.

When reading the cards, Madame Sosostris associates modern characters with the different identities of the tarot deck. She imbues their fate with symbolic entities of the mentioned initiation rituals. One of those characters is the Phoenician Sailor. “This is your card, the drowned Phoenician sailor” (TWL 47). Madame Sosostris assigns this card to the lyrical narrator, the consulting client but also, to the contemporaneous reader of the poem. The Phoenician sailor, later named Phlebas in “Death by Water”, recalls the archetypal dimension of the old gods of fertility and vegetation presented by Frazer (Pâtea 207).

The title “Death by Water” meets the warning of Madame Sosostris “fear death by water” (TWL 55). In this section, Eliot presents the paradoxical relationship between life and death (Pâtea 146). Phlebas “a fortnight dead” (TWL 312), undergoes a symbolic death. The drowning initiates a journey to the unknown realities of the psyche and conforms, as referred to by Jung, “the archetypal processes of individualization and formation of a new personality” (Pâtea 147). Therefore, the fate of Phlebas does not lead to an end, but towards a metamorphosis to a new self.

In archaic religions, water was a symbol of purification and dissolution. Water does not bring death but opens a possibility of purification and regeneration. Eliot evokes again the sacrificial deities that die and come back to life. Drowning turns into baptism, a metaphor of transformation and inner birth through water (Pâtea 257).

This possibility of regeneration is also visible in the reference to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, precisely, to the song of Ariel, who announces to Ferdinand a prospect of metamorphosis and purification. When Madame Sosostris states "those are pearls that were his eyes" (TWL 48), death opens the possibility to transmute something human and mundane such as the eyes, into something "rich and strange" (Shakespeare ii: 402) like pearls. (Pâtea 147). This is the same opportunity of purification that the inhabitants of *The Waste Land* pursue, the spiritual journey achieved by Phlebas, who is ultimately mentioned in a reminder; "Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you" (TWL 321). In essence, by using the mythical method, Eliot proclaims the possibility of inner salvation, regeneration, and change to the modern wastelanders. However, he also warns them that in order to achieve it, they would have to be aware of the past and of the mythical conscience.

3.5 The Hanged Man

Madame Sosostris also exposes the absence of the card of the Hanged Man. "I do not find The Hanged Man" (TWL 54-55). Eliot announces that in the modern world, this card full of symbols and Frazerian references, cannot be found. This implies that the aforementioned ancient sacrificial god celebrated in the vegetative rituals is no longer present.

The absence of the Hanged Man is presaging the poem's development; the vegetation ritual will not be completed. Despite the fact that through the poem Eliot presents different allusions to archetypal myths of death and rebirth, since the resurrected god cannot be found, there is no sacrifice to hasten the land's renewal (Práce 20). This occurs because the contemporary world remains oblivious to the spiritual meaning of this

sacrificial Frazerian god (Pâtea 104). Therefore, both *The Waste Land* and the modern world will be forever immersed in an impossible quest for regeneration.

3.6 Tiresias

According to Eliot's notes, Tiresias "although a mere spectator and not indeed a "character," is yet the most important figure in the poem, uniting all the characters and their experiences" (Eliot 290). He evokes different literary traditions: Homer, Ovid, and Dante. His myth in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (III) narrates that he separated two copulating snakes and was turned into a woman. Seven years later, he did the same and was reconverted into a man.

Eliot explores the possibility of transcending and combining individual points of view into a unified conscience. All the individuals of the poem are distinct from each other, but they converge in the consciousness of Tiresias (Moody 79) "all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias". Tiresias is a blind prophet, however, he "sees the substance of the poem" (Eliot 290). This is because he possesses memories gained by living as a man and a woman and thus, he knows everything. This duality that Tiresias represents, unifies past and present, myth and reality. His vision of the different realities allows him to perceive the whole truth, and that is the reason why Tiresias is considered the central figure of the poem. Besides, according to Brooker and Bentley, Eliot suggests that the present-day reader should try to perceive Tiresias' dualistic perspectives. This is due to, from a modern world position, the characters are distinct, but from the mythical perspective of Tiresias, the characters melt into each other (89).

3.7 The Antarctic Expedition and the Journey to Emmaus

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
But who is that on the other side of you? (TWL 360-366)

These lines of “What the Thunder Said” allude to the encounter between the disciples and Christ resurrected in the biblical myth of the journey to Emmaus (Pâtea 267). However, in a note to line 360, Eliot remarks that he refers to a real incident during Sir Ernest Shackleton’s Antarctic expedition in which “at the extremity of their strength, the explorers had the constant delusion that there was one more member than could actually be counted” (Eliot 293-294). These two stories, the ancient biblical myth and the incident in the Antarctic expedition only a years before the publication of *The Waste Land* share common traits. People who were utterly separated in time, space, and beliefs felt a similar mystical episode. Both stories talk about the presence of a transcendental figure that accompanied and helped them, a spiritual connection that denotes repeated patterns in the human conscience. Through the mythical method, Eliot aims to provide meaning and order to an archaic spiritual event in contemporary time by means of understanding the connection with the ancient knowledge, in this case, with the journey to Emmaus.

3.8 The Legend of Philomel

“*Quando fiam uti chelidon* [When shall I become like the swallow]” (TWL 429). This verse in the final section of the poem, evokes the legend of Philomel who previously introduced the motif of a regenerative metamorphosis in “A Game of Chess” (TWL 99). In Ovid’s myth, after being raped by Tereus, Philomel is converted into a nightingale transcending her adversities into a song, (VI) and thus, turning suffering into purification.

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot perpetuates the universal significance of suffering and abuse of the myth in the modern time (Pâtea 118). Philomel is the only character of the poem that accepts the painful process of purgation, an essential stage of the regeneration process. Her metamorphosis constitutes a glimpse of liberation in the corrupted wasteland and represents the long-awaited aim of purification, salvation, and rebirth.

Moreover, the reference to the swallow recalls the vegetative myths and the renewal of life in spring through the metamorphosis of Philomel. Just as Philomel changed into a swallow, the lyrical I of the poem desires to find meaning in suffering and to transcend pain. In the end, both the archaic character of the myth and the modern inhabitants of the wasteland, yearn for the renewal of life in spring (Pâtea 170).

4. Conclusion

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot developed the modern myth of a dying land, a fallen civilization, and its yearning towards revitalization. His aim was to revivify “The Waste Land” of contemporary life, and expose “the intense panorama of futility and anarchy” (Eliot 177) of the present day by returning to its anthropological and mythic roots. Through the mythical method, Eliot created a poetic language that tries to give order and meaning to the post-war situation of Europe and the rational and disillusioned Western culture by evoking that ancient, unified conscience.

Eliot revived a quest to find the regeneration symbolism of the vegetation myths and fertility rituals which celebrated a sacrificial god that dies and comes back to life for its people, and which is typified under the name of Phlebas, the Hanged Man, or the Fisher King, an ancient deity, that eventually cannot be found in the poem, and which entails the impossibility of change for both the wastelanders and for the coetaneous inhabitants of Eliot's time.

In conclusion, the mythical method in *The Waste Land* was a modernist impulse to unify the archetypal patterns of the archaic Frazerian myths and rituals with contemporaneous realities. It is a poetic device that allowed Eliot, who had an imperative desire for revival and regeneration, to explore the roots of the human consciousness and search for associations with the shattered experiences of the modern self.

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